

The Art of the Legal Cover Letter

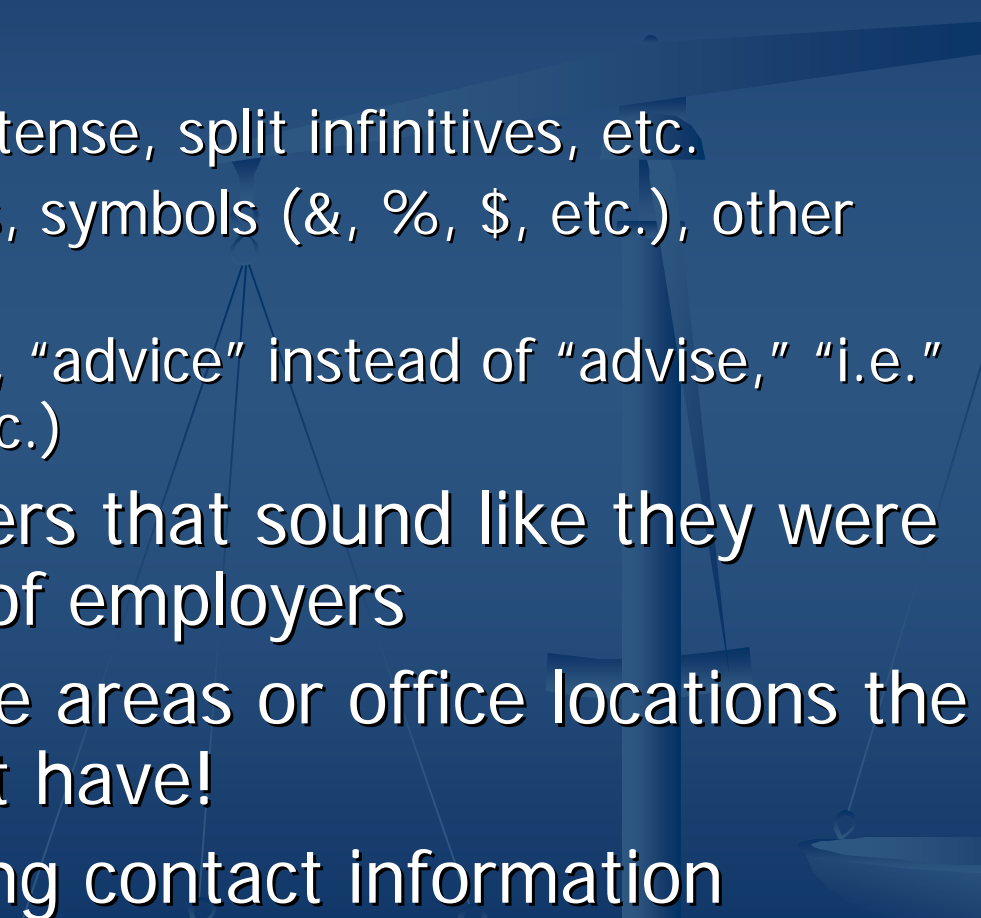


Career Development Office
Fall 2009

Goal of a Cover Letter

- ***Demonstrate*** interest in employer
 - Very important in a challenging market: employers have a ton of candidates to pick from and will likely choose students who seem ***genuinely interested!***
- ***Explain*** why you would be a good fit
 - Do not make the employer “do the work”
 - YOU need to explain why your experience is relevant and ***why you will be an asset to the firm***
- ***Show off*** your excellent writing ability
 - It is your first ***writing sample!***

Employer Cover Letter Pet Peeves

- Typos!
 - Spelling
 - Grammar: passive tense, split infinitives, etc.
 - Use of contractions, symbols (&, %, \$, etc.), other abbreviations
 - Wrong words (e.g., "advice" instead of "advise," "i.e." instead of "e.g." etc.)
 - Generic cover letters that sound like they were sent to hundreds of employers
 - Identifying practice areas or office locations the employer does not have!
 - Including the wrong contact information
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Anatomy of a Cover Letter – Part I

[HEADER – SAME AS RESUME]

Susan Jones

123 Center Street, NW • Washington, DC 12345 • (202) 123-4567 • sjones@law.gwu.edu
Permanent Address: *[include ONLY if you have an address near the city you are applying to]*

[DATE – USE UPLOAD OR MAILING DATE]

July 23, 2009

[ADDRESSEE INFORMATION]

Name *[Always use a name!]*

Organization *[Use full version: include “LLP,” “LLC,” etc.; use “U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission” – not “SEC” or Securities and Exchange Commission]*

Title

Address Line 1

Address Line 2

Address Line 3

[SALUTATION]

Dear Ms. Spears: *[Always use a name!]*

Humble Beginnings

- Header –
 - Use same as resume (3 lines max!)
 - Include “permanent” address if applying outside of DC
- Date –
 - Use upload/application date
- Addressee info –
 - ***Always*** include a contact name + title
 - Find in NALP Directory, Symplicity or Web
- Salutation –
 - ***NEVER*** “To Whom It May Concern”
 - If you don’t know gender, call employer or CDO and ask (anonymously!)

Anatomy of a Cover Letter – Part II

[BODY OF THE LETTER]

¶1. *Tell them who you are and why you are interested in working for them. If you are applying to a city other than D.C., indicate your ties/reason for interest in that city.*

I am a rising second year student at The George Washington University Law School and I am extremely interested in working for [*Use full version of employer name here; it is okay to use an abbreviated form in the rest of the letter*] because _____. I am most interested in working in the _____ office because _____, but I am also interested in _____ offices because _____.

¶2. *THE THESIS! Tell them why you would be an asset to the employer. The thesis should be at least two parts, up to three is okay. Discuss each part in turn, and give specific examples to convey why each is relevant/useful to the employer.*

¶3. *Discuss the rest of your thesis.*

¶4. *The concluding paragraph. Thank them for their consideration; indicate when you will follow up.*

[SIGN OFF]

Sincerely,

First Name [*typed first name is fine; electronic signatures sometimes make the files too large*]

Full Name

[ENCLOSURE LINE]

Enclosure [*make plural if uploading more than one document*]

The Body of the Letter

- Who you are: first year law student!
- When: summer or spring semester
- Where: which office(s) you are interested in
 - If you have no apparent ties to desired office, explain WHY –
 - For example, you are interested in working with clients in X industry, which is based there, have family/friends there, etc.
 - Need to convince them you are committed to that area
- Why: why you are interested in employer – focus on:
 - For firms: someone you know that works there, leading practice areas, recent cases/matters in the news
 - For government/public interest employers: because you believe in/want to further their mission!

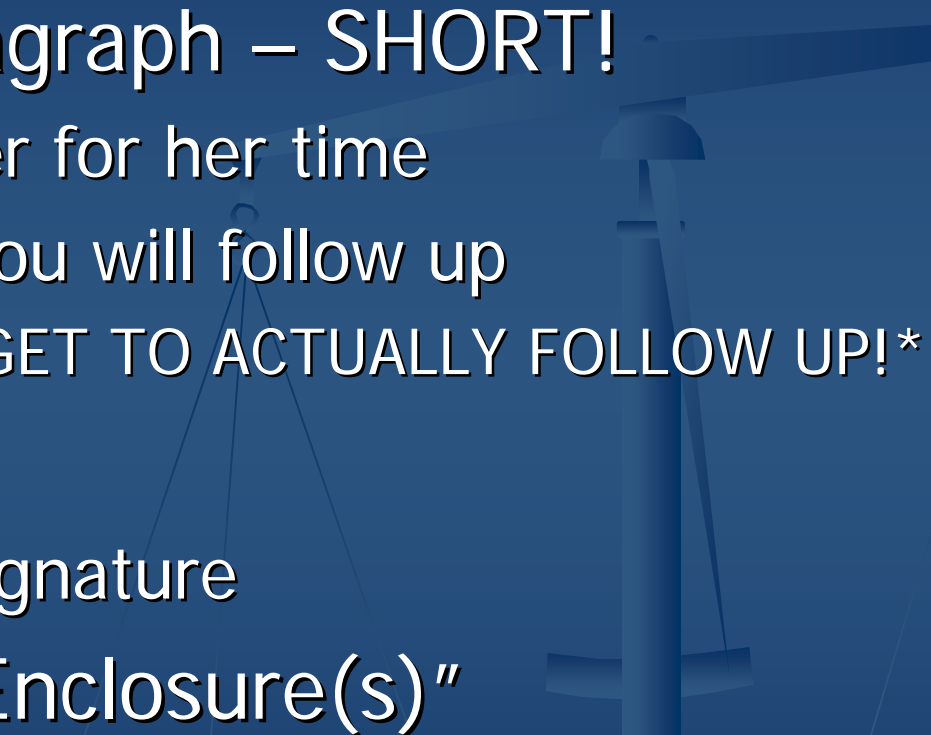
The Whole Point: *Your Pitch!*

- Goal: tell them why you would be an asset...i.e., give your *PITCH!*
- Ideal:
 - 1) practical, relevant legal experience and
 - 2) legal research and writing skills
- Other options:
 - Relevant non-legal experience
 - *Demonstrated* interest in relevant practice area
 - Career counselor can help you with ideal “pitch”

The Golden Rule of Cover Letters: Be Specific!

- Give specific examples
 - DO NOT rehash resume bullets
 - Use letter as opportunity to present most relevant, important experience in appropriate context
- NO: "I have worked on a variety of interesting litigation matters."
- YES: "I researched and drafted a memorandum analyzing whether a foreign litigant has standing to challenge venue in federal court."

The Wrap Up

- Concluding paragraph – SHORT!
 - Thank the reader for her time
 - Indicate when you will follow up
 - *DO NOT FORGET TO ACTUALLY FOLLOW UP!*
 - Sign off
 - No need for e-signature
 - Do not forget "Enclosure(s)"
- 

Cover Letter Drafting Strategy

- Assess your possible pitches
 - You should have several: one for each employer type
- Research employers
 - Determine which pitches would work best on which employers
- Pick your top employers (the ones you are MOST interested in) and write individualized letters for them
- For all others, organize into “pitch groups” to pair up with your pitches
 - Generate a template cover letter and resume for each

What Next?

- Start researching employers **NOW!**
 - Use CDO Resources
 - *See links on CDO webpage and in 2009-2010 Student Career Guide*
 - Meet with your Career Counselor for individualized research strategies
 - Start Requesting Informational Interviews
 - Existing and New Contacts
- Review drafts with your career counselor
- Apply!

More Information

- Visit the CDO webpage
 - www.law.gwu.edu/careers
- Read the *2009-2010 Student Career Guide* and Handouts on the webpage
- Meet with your Career Counselor
 - *After* CDO 1L Orientation for your section